DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 227 010 SO 014 466

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TITLE Women's Art and Culture.
INSTITUTION Michigan Univ., Ann Arbor. Womens Studies Program.
SPONS AGENCY National Endowment for the Humanities (NFAH), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 77
GRANT EH2-5643-76-772
NOTE 89p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Artists; *Creativity; Culture; Dance; *Females; Feminism; Film Production; *Fine Arts; Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Literature; Music; Mythology; Photography; Teaching Guides; Theater Arts; Units of Study; Visual Arts; Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

An interdisciplinary course on women in the fine arts for college-level women's studies programs is presented in five units. The course raises questions about women as artists in a sexist society, then examines the vision of women artists in the personal and political spheres, and concludes with a study of great women artists. Unit 1 provides a conceptual framework by discussing women's conventional roles in the arts as object, myth, and creator and examines how "great artists" are made. Unit 2, "Women's Oppression and Creativity," examines sources of frustration; masculine, mainstream, and feminine art forms; and the art of non-Western women. Unit 3 focuses on women in the home, workplace, and community and on creating an artistic heritage for women. Unit 4, "Art and Politics," discusses the insights of women as a marginal group, women's art and social criticism, and feminism. The final unit features individual women authors, painters, sculptors, photographers, musicians, dancers, designers, actors, filmmakers, and interdisciplinary artists. Each unit includes an introduction, lecture outline, resource materials list, and discussion questions. A selected bibliography is also provided. The course depends heavily on audiovisual presentations. (KC)

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WOMEN'S STUDIES CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROJECT
funded by
The National Endowment for the Humanities

ED227010

WOMEN'S ART AND CULTURE

by

1977

Nancy Faires Conklin

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Edited by Mary I. Edwards

Women's Studies Curriculum Series

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Women's Studies Program
The University of Michigan

1977

Preface

The Women's Studies Curriculum Series consists of four interdisciplinary courses: Women and Identity, Women's Art and Culture, A Cross Cultural Study of Women, and New Woman, New World: The American Experience. Addressed to teachers of Women's Studies in American Colleges, community colleges, and universities, the courses provide both a conceptual framework and the resource materials necessary for the study of women in each subject area. Introductory remarks define the goals of each course and the main ideas of individual units; lecture outlines (or lecture topics) describe in skeletal form the specific points to be covered in class; annotated bibliographic materials (including films, slides, records, etc.) suggest resources for students and teachers; quotations for discussion pose central issues which may be discussed in class or shaped into paper topics or exam questions. Each course deliberately provides more material than would ordinarily be covered in one semester so that teachers may select and adapt the materials to suit the needs of their students.

We envision many uses for the Series. First, the courses were specifically designed to fill the curricular gap between the now widely taught introductory courses in Women's Studies (commonly, a broadly interdisciplinary treatment of issues affecting the lives of women) and the more

narrow specialized research seminar. Each course considers its subject from the perspective of at least two disciplines, and ideally should be team taught. The Series also provides resources for teachers wishing to add material on women to courses in the traditional curriculum. For example, a teacher of Chinese History might adopt materials from the "Women in China" unit of A Cross Cultural Study of Women; teachers of courses ranging from Art History to Home Economics will find Women's Art and Culture a valuable resource; the extensive bibliography in New Woman, New World: The American Experience should be useful to all. Moreover, the four courses in the Series complement and clarify each other, and may be used in combination. For example, several of the courses briefly consider the subject of matriarchy; the teacher wishing to develop a full unit on this topic might compare these treatments, and then consult A Cross Cultural Study of Women for a lengthier analysis. Both Women and Identity and New Woman, New World: The American Experience consider women's role in social change, while Women's Art and Culture includes a section on art as social protest; thus a full unit on women and social change would include materials from several courses. Finally, the Series offers a solid curricular base for a college or university's newly founded Women's Studies program, as well as the means to enrich and update the curricular offerings of well-established programs.

The courses in the Series try to teach students to think critically about the complex historical, political, social, psychological, and aesthetic questions raised by the new scholarship on women. We believe that scholarship, perhaps especially that which derives from humanistic study, illumines and at its best can transform the lives of people. Since Women's Studies scholars and teachers know that scholarly evidence need not be divorced from the truth of personal experience, whenever possible we suggest ways for students to connect their study with their lives. Perhaps most important, we recognize that good teachers teach good courses; we rely on your energy and talent to bring these courses to life.

Acknowledgments

The impetus for what became the Women's Studies Curriculum Development Project came from Professor Louise Tilly in her first year as Director of The University of Michigan Women's Studies Program. Funded by grant number EH2-5643-76-772 from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the project brought together a group of Women's Studies scholars and teachers from colleges, community colleges, and universities in Southern Michigan for a weekly Research on Women Seminar. The Seminar examined the new scholarship on women in the various disciplines in order to determine how it could best be integrated into

the Women's Studies classroom. Task forces of seminar members, representing Eastern Michigan University, Central Michigan University, Western Michigan University, Schoolcraft College, and The University of Michigan.then cooperatively designed the courses.

I would like to thank the members of the Research on Women Seminar, particularly those from distant colleges and universities who made the weekly trek to Ann Arbor through the historic snows of the Winter of 1977. I am especially grateful to the core group of task force members for creating coherent courses out of complex and varied materials. Thanks also go to the Office of the Dean of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, The University of Michigan, for providing initial funding and office space for the project; to Marti Martell, of the University of Michigan Women's Studies Program, for assisting in preparation of these materials; to Anita Clos, for her faithful assistance throughout the Women's Studies Curriculum Development Project; and to the National Endowment for the Humanities, whose views are not necessarily represented by the findings and conclusions presented here.

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Women's Art and Culture

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Women's Art and Culture

Introduction

The women's movement has recognized the centrality of the arts in shaping our ideas about ourselves and our society. Realizing, as few political movements before it, the power of myth, story, song, film, and visual images to define what women and men can and should be, feminism has analyzed art, criticism of art, and the art world, challenging the assumptions underlying not only the ideology represented in art, but the definition of art itself. What began as a political movement has now become a social and cultural movement. Women are demanding to read, see, and hear about themselves; women artists are achieving entry into the male bastions of museums, galleries, symphonies, and best-seller lists.

The materials in this course are designed to introduce students to women's art, to women artists, and to women's creative potential. We assume no specific training in or familiarity with the arts. Rather, we assume the questioning attitude of feminist humanist research, judging art solely on aesthetic grounds and within the appropriate socio-historical context. The materials are designed to raise questions, not provide answers, for this is a period of analysis, evaluation and redefinition which will continue to demand the creative thinking of artist and informed public alike.

These materials are designed to be used as a whole or in part, in courses on women in the arts, but also in other women's studies courses. The course first raises critical questions about artists as women in a sexist society (Units I and II), then examines the vision of women artists in the personal and political spheres (Units III and IV) and concludes with a study of individual great women artists whose work students will then be prepared to evaluate. Any section might be extracted and inserted, as a unit, in a course on another topic. A study of women's literature, for instance, might be supplemented with visual artists' work. An introductory course in women's studies might include a section on women's alternative vision of the world as seen through art.

This course is highly dependent upon audio-visual support. Slide shows make up the bulk of the presentations on the visual arts; tape recordings or records (with duplications of the texts for each student) are the basis for discussion of music; dance is illustrated through film. Sources of slides and appropriate recordings and films are listed in the bibliography. Because audio-visual materials require a formal presentation, for the success of such a course it is important that students be actively involved in class work. Although some may have considerable knowledge of the arts, these materials can and should be made accessible to students with no formal training. Some activities which have proven successful are:

Gallery, museum, concert, poetry readings, studio visits

Demonstrations and talks by local artists and craftswomen, in class or in their workshops. Some students also may have talents and experience which they could share.

Group activities such as a quilting bee, a gourmet or ethnic dinner (e.g., each student makes a dish from her/his ethnic background), have proven successful.

Assignment of research on a notable woman artist with a presentation to the rest of the class (research guide questions help here)

Assignment of a creative project, i.e., each student must explore her/his own imagination and creative skills in some art form, (writing poetry, quilting, macrame, painting, etc.) with a class party at which each presents the project to the class.

With a variety of activities, both artistically and academically inclined students have an opportunity to excell and experience the art world from the points of view of artist and of appreciator. Contract grading (in which students must satisfactorily fulfill specific assignments in order to receive a grade, with more rigorous requirements for a higher grade, rather than individual qualitative judgements of each assignment) can be used successfully when challenging students to perform tasks which are new to them.

Five approaches to women's art and culture are represented in these materials. "Women in the arts: A Conceptual Framework" is an introduction to the subject matter and to a feminist analysis of women artists and their work. "Women's Oppression and Creativity" examines the roles women have been permitted to play in the arts, both inside and outside the mainstream art establishment. It considers artists as women with personal as well as professional needs. This section would be relevant not only to the study of women in arts, but also to the history of culture and society as well. Unit III, which could be extracted for use in a general introduction to women studies, surveys "Women on Women"--how women artists in various media have portrayed themselves and their sisters, in fantasy and reality. Unit IV, "Art and Politics," examines roles of artists in movements for social change, women's contributions in political art and social commentary, and the impact of feminism on art and artists. Any women's studies course on political or social philosophy would benefit from inclusion of such easily accessible materials. Unit V, "Great Women and Great Art," suggests representative major figures in various fields who merit individual study as artists and as women. A course on women artists in a specific medium, e.g., drama, literature, or the visual arts, might be complemented by study of a few major figures from another field.

Within each approach a number of individual topics are addressed. A brief description of the topic is followed by a list of resource materials, including appropriate artists for study, bibliographic suggestions and possible class activities. A series of Discussion Questions follow, which suggest approaches to the material. These might be used for preparation of presentations or discussed directly in class. Reference is made in the text to items in the selected bibliography at the end of the course. We have established the following course goals:

Becoming acquainted with women artists, their work and their vision

Getting our history and culture back

Breaking down the barriers between artists and society, between creators and the public

Recognizing our personal needs for beauty and for expression

Gaining confidence in our own creativity and ability to judge and define art

Learning how to appreciate, judge and criticize art

Seeing ourselves through women artists' visions

Trying to ascertain whether there is a distinctly female vision or female aesthetic

Questioning the role artists play in culture and society

Coming to recognize art as a crucial and central part of a fulfilling life

Recognizing that there can be 'art' wherever there is beauty and imagination

Learning about the achievements of women in the arts, so that women artists can serve as role models

Studying the barriers to women in the arts and strategies for overcoming them

Overcoming narrow categorization of art forms and coming to understand their cross fertilizations

Unit I. Women in the Arts: A Conceptual Framework

Conventional Roles for Women in the Arts
How "Great Artists" are Made
Overlooked Women Artists

Conventional Roles for Women in the Arts

1. Woman as Object

An introduction to the roles women have been permitted to play in art requires, first of all, a discussion of the depiction of women by well known artists in familiar art forms: the "canon." Since women have rarely been the creators of these works of art, we see our image through male eyes.

Resource Materials

Any basic art history text book (try the one being used in introductory courses at your school) contains pictures which make good subjects for evaluation; nude portraits of women are especially good for sparking discussion. Note particularly extreme examples in the work of male Surrealists.

Popular music is a good starting point for discussion. Students may have hummed songs without thinking of the real meaning of the lyrics.

Jung's Man and His Symbols is richly illustrated and an excellent resource

Keats' "Ode on A Grecian Urn." Have students recognize the central image of this famous poem about art: a positive depiction of rape.

Questions for Discussion

1. How much male art is about women? When woman is the subject of male art, in what ways does she become an "object"?

2. What patterns and stereotypes recur in the depiction of women?

3. What aspects of women and their lives are missing?

2. Woman as Myth

Simone de Beauvoir argues that "humanness" has been defined solely in male terms: man is "subject" and woman is "other." In the history of human thinking, men have often created mythic images of woman which serve to embody man's most intense fantasies and fears. Her very "otherness" is expressed in myth.

Resource Materials

de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (particularly Part Three, hard going for students but the best there is, by far)

Ellmann, Thinking About Women

Millett, Sexual Politics (particularly the first chapter)

Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do?" in Koppelman-Cornellian (ed.) (relatively easy reading)

Jung, Man and His Symbols (an extremely valuable way of introducing students to the power of mythic imagery over our lives and ideas) See his theory about female and male archetypes.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the mythic roles women have played? (e.g., the virgin/innocent/victim/child; the temptress/harlot/goddess/bitch; the mother/matriarch/goddess/earth/madonna; the muse . . .).

2. How have these roles been developed and expanded throughout artistic tradition? (e.g., the cult of the Virgin Mary; Venus; Medea; Lady MacBeth; Marilyn Monroe; Shirley Temple).

3. How does a mythic image come to be more real than the actual people represented by it? How does a mythic image constrict the behavior of the people it represents?

3. Woman as Creator: Homemaking

In Western art all creative endeavor traditionally has been categorized as either "decorative," "fine," "high" art or "functional," "applied," "low" art, known as crafts or handicrafts. Carving statues from wood is an "art"; creating wood reliefs for doors, windows, mantels and cornices is a "craft." This distinction is partially economic: only the wealthy have the economic surplus necessary to acquire totally non-useful objects; the less wealthy gather aesthetic pleasure wherever it happens to occur in their everyday environment. Part of the attraction of craft work, currently experiencing a remarkable revival among young people, is the attraction we all have to beautiful things and to the creative process itself. This drive is also part of the satisfaction many women find in aspects of homemaking--creating a beautiful and comfortable environment for their families.

Resource Materials

Prussin, "Environmental Arts of West Africa." Contains one of the few good discussions of the problems inherent in judging art through the veil of the fine/applied arts dichotomy.

Use slides or actual samples of needlework (e.g., quilts) to stimulate discussion of women's traditional creative outlets (see also materials listed under "Women and the Private Sphere").

Moffat and Painter, Revelations, Diaries of Women (a good collection)

Questions for Discussion

1. How are women's traditional creative outlets (needlework, cooking, letter and diary writing, etc.) art forms?

2. What would happen to a woman with strong artistic drive and high artistic potential in traditional, sex-stratified Western society? What artistic outlets have been open to her?

3. If she created in the media readily available to her (needlework, weaving, clothing design, cooking, home decorating, etc.), how would her work be judged? How should it be judged?

4. What's "wrong" with functional objects anyway?

How "Great Artists" are Made

1. Women and the Art Establishment

In order to break into the major art forms, one has very little choice but to go through the traditional critical and distributional channels which constitute the "art establishment." The establishment both controls and defines acceptable art education; even after an artist has gained the requisite skills and credentials, she must face the world of gallery owners, theater directors and producers, publishing houses, film and video studios, booking agencies, recording companies, funding agencies, and critics. There are very few women in decision-making positions in these institutions.

Resource Materials

Nochlin, "Why have there been no Great Women Artists?" in Hess and Baker. (See particularly section on the history of art academies)

Reviews in the Sunday New York Times Book Review and Arts and Leisure sections. Have students read these reviews and bring them to class for a discussion of the role of reviews. These are very influential critical media. Be sure to discuss not only how works are reviewed but also what is not reviewed (e.g., books appearing originally in paperback).

Copies of The Feminist Art Journal. See especially report on the protest at the Whitney about lack of representation of women in major art shows (see bibliography).

See bibliography for materials to use in discussion of alternate presses, recording companies, distribution agencies, etc.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does one become an artist? What education is necessary?

2. What art forms are available to people without access to expensive equipment, space and instruction? From which media are these people excluded?

3. How does an artist become well known? What is the role of critics and reviewers?

4. How are prices for art set?

5. What does it mean to be an artist with a full time outside job? Full time household responsibilities?

6. How has the art establishment discriminated against women?

7. How does the art establishment exercise control over the definition of what art can be?

8. What has been the impact of various schools of criticism (e.g., the "New Criticism" in literature or structuralism) on evaluation of women's art?

2. The Myth of the Great Artist

Parallel to the "Great Man" theory of history (that the handful of Alexanders, Caesars, Napoleons, Lincolns and Churchills determine the course of the world and the fates of all of us) is a theory of art determined by "Great Men"; this assumption underlies the collection and criticism of artifacts of human culture. Nochlin characterizes this concept as follows: "Underlying the question about women as artists, we find the whole myth of the Great Artist--subject of a hundred monographs, unique, godlike--bearing within his person since birth a mysterious essence, rather like the golden nugget in Mrs. Grass's chicken soup, called Genius" (p. 7).

Women have been excluded from the training, education and patronage in the arts through which such "genius" is nurtured.

Moreover, women were expected to be generally "accomplished" in the arts, not to devote themselves to one art form. As those responsible for the overall quality of cultural life, women in Europe held salons (e.g., Madame de Stael) where they entertained, criticized and even collaborated with the "great artists" but became known to history as "hostesses." A "great artist" is usually defined as one who has a large body of work, who is thought to have developed a "new" concept, wholly original (as Athena sprung from the head of Zeus), and who has disciples or a school of criticism to carry on his work.

Resource Materials

Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no Great Women Artists," in Hess and Baker

Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (she addresses the question directly in this autobiography)

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (discusses the requirements for artistic growth as they apply to women).

Biographies of great male artists (particularly child prodigies, such as Mozart) should be constrasted with biographies of any woman who has struggled to become an artist: Jane Austen hiding of her manuscripts from her family, George Eliot writing under a pseudonym.

The career of painter Angelica Kauffmann is a fine example of a well-nurtured female child "genius."

Questions for Discussion

1. How does one become a "genius?"

2. How does the definition of genius as an inborn spark which will inevitably surface or come to fruition affect the evaluation of women artists?

3. Could Grandma Moses have been a "great artist?"

4. How does the "great artist" theory affect the collaborative work women are often prone to do?

5. What is the effect of women having to work anonymously or secretly at their art, in their spare time?

6. If universal experiences are defined by men, and being a "great artist" depends upon the expression of universal experiences, what is a woman artist to do?

Overlooked Women Artists

An introduction to the vast numbers of women artists who have been forgotten. Many were well known in their own day but their work was not catalogued, researched, or maintained. The rise of formal schools of criticism in the nineteenth century was particularly devastating for women's history in the arts. Women whose names appear in earlier compendia were written out of art history by Victorian scholars. Feminist researchers need to give further attention to the problems caused by women artists' anonymity and use of pseudonyms; to the misattribution of women's work to male contemporaries; and to the difficult job of discovering, evaluating, and collecting the work of women artists. Much literature and music is out of print; much art has been lost or destroyed.

Resource Materials

Reference works:
Tufts, Our Hidden Heritage
Munsterberg, A History of Women Artists
Peterson and Wilson, Women Artists
Harris and Nochlin, Women Artists, 1550-1950
Showalter, A Literature of Their Own
Spacks, The Female Imagination
Moers, Literary Women
Colby, The Singular Anomaly

Ms. Article on Women Composers (see bibliography).

A slide show on women painters/sculptors of the 14th to 18th or 20th centuries

Use examples of specific women who worked under pseudonyms (e.g., George Sand) or whose work has been mis-attributed to male artists (e.g., Judith Leyster and Constance Marie Charpentier).

Use also examples of women who worked in media (such as needlework) which were not considered "art."

Questions for Discussion

1. Who are these women artists? Why haven't we heard of them?

2. How did women who managed to become artists get their training? (Note that painters were often the daughters of painters and learned in their father's studios; not only were women denied access to academies, they also were denied literacy).

3. How would writing or painting domestic or regional subjects affect the standing of a woman artist? What is a "local colorist?"

4. What would be the effect of the restrictions placed upon women's behavior (not being permitted to travel widely, or to go alone in society) upon the subjects available to her as an artist?

5. What does it mean for contemporary women artists to have had little knowledge of their heritage?

6. Why might mis-attributions of women's art works take place? (Male artists bring more money; a "great" work of a school is regularly attributed to the "master"; women often worked anonymously or under pseudonyms).

Unit II. Women's Oppression and Creativity

Sources of Frustration
Women in "Masculine" Art Forms
Women Artists in Mainstream Forms
Women Creating in "Feminine" Art Forms
Form and Function: The Art of Non-Western Women

Sources of Frustration

1. Spiritual, Intellectual, and Material Needs of Women Artists

A general discussion of what is needed for a woman to discover, develop, express, and sustain her creativity. The best basis for such a discussion is Woolf's A Room of One's Own. Woolf contends that women must have an independent income and a private space in which to create (just as male artists do). She also maintains that women need a continuing tradition of women artists to build on.

Resource Materials

Woolf's A Room of One's Own (there are notes in the paperback edition)

Amy Lowell's poem "Sisters" (in Howe and Bass), an attempt to call on the sparse group of sister poets who form her heritage

Questions for Discussion

1. How does Woolf's analysis help us to understand the needs and position of women artists?

2. What is this "room" that Woolf is talking about? How is it to be understood in a psychological, as well as physical, sense?

3. In what ways can this heritage of women artists she describes be used by women who are trying to create art? (For example, as a source of form, content, theme, or imagery; as a source of encouragement, a connection through common female experience).

4. Is Woolf's thesis correct? If so, how does one account for artists who survived without this heritage and support?

5. What is the effect on women artists of making one's living from one's art? Of not being able to do so? How important is monetary remuneration to the artist's concept of self and success?

2. Women in the Art World

In a non-egalitarian society, the established art world often reflects the values of the dominant group. Human or "universal" experience is defined as white, upper and middle class male experience; any female or minority artist must either attempt to create through an experience which she/he does not share or risk being termed "minor" or marginal. She may be a fine artist, in establishment eyes, but "a woman among women," not a true universalist. Women's unique experience and situation in society lead to an art that must be female, although at its best it is truly human. The question then becomes whether a "universal" reflected through female experience is still considered representative of the human. Woman's societal role as child raiser and homemaker affects

the form, content, and quantity of women artists' work; as a result, the masculinist art establishment may distort or deprecate her work.

Resource Materials

Judy Chicago, Through the Flower. Chicago addresses this issue when she discusses her instructors' and colleagues' sexist response to her attempt to express female experience in her work.

Kate Chopin, The Awakening. Chopin is beginning to be re-evaluated as a major American literary figure; since she wrote about the limited world she knew, she was considered a "local colorist."

Emily Dickinson's life and work: an excellent example of extreme restriction of movement and social interaction; her art has seemed incomprehensible to some and "trivial" or "quaint" to others.

Many artists' use of pseudonyms (George Eliot/George Sand) because of audience reaction to "women's art."

The life of Antonio Brico (captured on film in Antonia) shows a woman prevented from practicing her art, conducting.

Artemisia Gentilischi's series depicting Judith decapitating Holoferenes may reflect her view of the rape she suffered at the hands of one of her father's apprentices.

Questions for Discussion

1. How are women artists redefined as a separate category?

2. How are women's works reviewed?

3. What specific barriers has the art establishment put in the way of women artists? What more subtle restrictions?

4. What conditions of women's social role affect her ability to create art? (Note her lack of travel, until recent times, in contrast with the young man's European tour; lack of education; pressure to marry.)

3. Artists who are women in a sexist society

The problems women face as individuals (mothers, lovers, workers, wives) often have tremendous impact on their art. Time devoted to child care and domestic work is time taken from art; careers are often interrupted for child raising; women may begin careers late in life; women faced with domestic responsibilities may have difficulty giving their own artistic work highest priority.

Resource Materials

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper. Shows a writer whose husband (a doctor) diagnoses her as "ill" and forbids her to write. She becomes "insane."

Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar. Shows a writer trying to launch her career in the 1950s, at the height of the feminine mystique; also driven to madness.

Numerous women artists' lives illustrate sacrifices made to children and husbands, or the sacrifice of a personal life in order to pursue a career. See especially life of Jane Austen, or Zelda Fitzgerald.

Gabriele Muenter. Her life illustrates the fate of a sensitive woman attached to a rising male star (Wassily Kandinsky). She was within her own circle denigrated to the status of "hostess," forgotten in art history, and unable to work for many years after she was deserted by her lover.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why are the protagonists of The Yellow Wallpaper and The Bell Jar driven insane? What forces drive them "crazy?"

2. Zelda Fitzgerald's writings were often published under Scott's name, so that they brought more money. What would be the effect of lack of credit for one's work?

3. How does association with male artists, as husbands, lovers, or close friends, affect the art work of women? What is women's role in artistic circles?

Women in "Masculine" Art Forms

Some forms of artistic expression have virtually excluded women. In Western culture, architecture has become a male domain as it has been professionalized. In music, certain instruments were "too large" or otherwise inappropriate for a woman (tubas, tympani, base viol). While some women have gained entry into orchestras, the leadership of orchestras, companies, and choirs remains in "authoritative," masculine hands. Music composition has remained largely closed to women; those who have written are virtually unperformed and unrecorded. Women rarely create monumental sculpture.

The forms of art deemed appropriate or inappropriate for women reflect our culture's definitions of sex-appropriate behavior. Large scale sculpting and welding are not "fit" for women's "fine" hands and "weak" bodies; leadership roles such as conducting or directing are seen as part of the male prerogative of being in command. Moreover, in architecture our emphasis is on public, important buildings where men do their work (in business, industry, etc.) rather than on homes, or churches.

Resource Materials

Antonia, the film about a woman conductor's frustration about how she was treated by her profession.

"Monumenta: Where are the Women?" Article in the Feminist Art Journal.

Doris Cole, From Tipi to Skyscraper. Describes non-western and western views of architecture. Shows the former to be an extension of domestic role of women; in the latter architecture gradually professionalized away from the home as a result of industrialization. Parallel loss of women's economic power and architectural authority. Cole also discusses 19th century suffragists' integration of architecture and domestic arts.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does women's exclusion from certain art forms reflect our culture's biases?

2. What has happened to women who have tried to enter "male" professions?

3. What is the role of economics in excluding women from certain art forms (cost of materials and facilities).

Women Artists in Mainstream Art Forms

Regardless of obstacles, some particularly talented and enterprising women have become well-recognized leaders in their artistic fields. There are in general two models for success in a mainstream art medium: by "making it in the man's world" or by creating her own world.

1. Making it in the Man's World

A number of the best-known women artists have succeeded by doing what men do and doing it better. Among these are Margaret Bourke-White, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Rosa Bonheur. Each of these women is famous, a recognized success. Each also has been considered eccentric, willful and, to some extent, "masculine" in forcefulness and commitment to her career. Margaret Bourke-White was the first woman to be invited to the Soviet Union as a journalist; to fly on bombing mission, etc.). She attacked the man's world by beginning her professional career as an industrial photographer in Cleveland's mills and furnaces, then by doing industrial photography for Fortune magazine. Georgia O'Keeffe has become almost legendary for her dedication to her work and her reclusive life style. Like Bourke-White, she married a fellow artist, photographer Edward Steichen; Bourke-White's marriage lasted just a few years, O'keeffe's much longer, but even the latter was not conventional. Rosa Bonheur is becoming as famous for her life-style as for her work in feminist circles. She carried

a special certificate from the French government which authorized her use of male clothing when working around the markets and slaughterhouses. She and her long-time female companion lived a bizarre and fascinating life in Paris and the South of France.

Resource Materials

Bourke-White's autobiography and books of her photos illustrate the changing themes in her work over the course of her career.

O'Keeffe's book, in which she describes her own development as an artist-as well as biographical essays.

There are a great many other artists whom one could bring up for discussion in this sense--the traditional female career/family choices are not necessarily different for artists, but may be intensified.

Questions for Discussion

1. What sacrifices have been made by women artists? Would these same sacrifices be expected of talented men?
2. How does the need for "choosing" the brand of "eccentricity", "exceptionality" affect these women's lives and art?
3. What does it mean for an artist's lifestyle to receive more attention than her work?

2. Making Her Own World

A number of very successful women artists have managed to alter the conditions which most women face: they have combined family and career. The most outstanding examples are Barbara Hepworth and Kathe Kollwitz, both of whom raised

families (in Hepworth's case right in the dust of the studio), refusing to sacrifice either career or family. Hepworth was twice divorced, but kept her children as an integral part of her artistic life, using them for inspiration and relief. Kollwitz' family arranged itself around her work, she spent little time on anything but her drawing and her husband and children. She had familial support since the time she was a young girl. Kate Chopin, wrote "best," she says, when her children were clustered around her in the parlor (she also admits she had to stick to short stories because novels took too much conentration.) Margaret Mitchell wrote Gone with the Wind at her kitchen table--and it was her only novel, written over a number of years between household chores. Anne Tyler, a notable young novelist, has written about her experiences working at home. (See bibliography.)

Resource Materials

Barbara Hepworth, Pictorial Autobiography. Juxtaposes sculptures she was creating with snapshots of events important to her life at the time.

Kollwitz, see biographies.

Biographies and autobiographical writings of writers such as Austen, Chopin, Mitchell, Tyler (see above).

Questions for Discussion

1. How does combining work and family affect art? Can an artist become truly "Great" without total, singleminded dedication?

2. What does it mean for an artist to do her work in her 'spare time' or while keeping house--does she miss the feelings of being a professional?

3. What forms are more conducive/less conducive to working at home? How do the artists themselves feel about these 'restrictions?'

Women Creating in "Feminine" Art Forms

1. Women in the Public Sphere

Some consideration should be given to the professions in which women have been permitted to practice: dancing, singing, acting. We need to consider critics' and society's view of those professions.

Resource Materials

Actresses: see biographies and autobiographies of Sara Bernhardt, Mae West, Joan Crawford, Katherine Hepburn, Liv Ullman.

Dancers have always been heroines to little girls; ask the class to recall their favorites.

Singers: Maria Callas, Leontyne Price, Jenny Lind, Mahalia Jackson, Lena Horne, Marion Anderson, Bessie Smith.

Questions for Discussion

1. What has been the history of women on the stage? Why have actresses or singers been labelled "harlots" or "loose women?"
2. In what ways do actresses and singers still suffer from this stereotype?
3. Why do women get to be prima ballerinas, but rarely choreographers? How is this distinction reflected in other arts?
4. Are women only allowed to achieve where they are "needed"--that is, to sing/act/dance female roles?

2. Women in the Private Sphere

Women have often created art within the confines of domesticity. Much of their creative work is not considered art,

however, for homemaking is not considered a professional activity. There are a number of media to consider.

Needlework

One of the most overlooked art forms in our society is needle and textile work. Women have been using scraps and rests to make beautiful items of clothing and home decoration since textile work has been known. Many of these have developed into sophisticated forms of expression, with individual women developing their own designs and adapting the designs of others to their own taste. Needlework has not been considered art for a number of reasons: it is not purely decorative in most instances; it is not created by people with the status of 'professional art workers'; the materials are often scraps; patterns are often adapted, not original; it is created by women. (See section pg. 9) on the fine/applied arts dicotomy). However, needlework also penetrates into communities where no 'high arts' are ever seen--the consumers of needlework are not primarily upper and upper-middle class, but working class; rural and immigrant communities are prolific in needlework. The immense artistic value of needlework is perhaps best illustrated by the example of the patchwork quilt, which predates painting (by 100 years) in its use of abstract and geometric principles for the organization of space. Other forms of needlework, such as different types of embroidery, lacemaking, and sewing also introduce an appreciation of these media and artistic forms.

Resource Materials

Actual study of quilts is really necessary to their appreciation. Although slides given an accurate representation of the 2-dimensional form, the third dimension, the quilted raised texture, is equally important to consider in appreciation of the work -- an experienced needlewoman might be invited to class (through local art associations, historical societies, women's social and church groups, they can be located in any community).

The texts most useful and accessible in this area are Bishop, Holstein (who uses an entirely two-dimensional approach, but offers a good introduction to the history of quilts).

Students might be asked to interview older family members who had experience in needlework themselves or who grew up when 'everyone' had to learn some.

Quilting is a uniquely american art form; class members may have some interesting other needlework media to contribute: either better known types like lacing, tatting, embroidery or unusual specialized media such as the fine Ukranian embroidery (Swedish weaving). They might be invited to bring pieces of handwork from their families' collections; textile workers themselves could be asked to explain the craftwork and the aesthetic goals of the various media.

The bibliography lists sources on other needlework and textile media which can be explored by individuals or the class.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is needlework art?

2. How is needlework created? What share in a creative process does an individual woman using a 'pattern' have?

3. Why has needlework not been considered art? How is it being reevaluated?

4. Can aesthetic standards be applied to quilts just as they are to paintings? Why or why not?

5. How are the needle arts peculiarly suited to women who are homemakers? (Materials are cheap; the activity can be excused as 'useful, e.g., making bedcovers; it is easily portable within the home; it is repetitious, so can be put down and picked up as the family demands).

6. What is the process by which a quilt is created and how does it reflect female culture (individuals work up a quilt top; the women make an opportunity to get together when the quilting is to be done, thus breaking up the isolation of each in her own house; communal work is performed).

7. What does anonymity mean to an artist? Were these women unknown?

8. How did women's needlework culture parallel the established art circles (some women were known as exceptionally good and their work copied; Local, County and State fairs held judged exhibits, with prizes awarded to the best quilts and women came to admire and to get inspirations for new designs; accomplished needlewomen took on young girls' instruction at their mothers' request, similar to an apprenticeship); especially fine quilts were 'kept' and rarely used).

9. How has needlework not paralleled established art forms? (No recognition of the artists; no 'collections' except in the families of the creators; form followed function; needle work has never been considered meaningful or economic "work").

Cooking

Cooking is considered an art form in certain cultures (France, China, Japan), where men dominate haute cuisine, just as they dominate other forms of "high art." We distinguish between a cook and a chef, between daily cooking (usually performed by women) and meals prepared for special occasions (the American male's performance at the backyard barbecue).

Resource Materials

Have the class analyze this American ritual: the male head of household, with great ceremony, carves a large piece of meat; the woman has prepared the entire dinner, including the table setting, and cleans up afterwards.

Cookbooks. Consider Erma Rombauer's Joy of Cooking and M.F.K. Fisher's The Art of Eating. Both constitute works of literature, for they weave narrative and cooking instructions. Compare to needlework instructions or other "how to" books.

Class Project: cooking a "gourmet" meal. Class members could contribute favorite family or ethnic dishes.

Questions for Discussion

1. When is cooking an art form?
2. How have women integrated food preparation and serving of food as an aesthetic expression?
3. What does the current interest in cooking classes, imported cooking implements, and foreign foods mean? Is it like the renewed interest in other crafts?

Interior Decorating

When a trained professional does interior decorating, it is an art, but not when it is as part of a homemaker's work. Knowledge of the arts goes into effective interior design (use of color, space planning, thematic or ecclectic approaches, etc.).

Resource Materials

Borrow a film on interior decorating used in home economics classes in your local high school. See questions below.

Home decorating magazines. Compare to magazines for "professionals" in interior design.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the relationship between architecture and interior design? (Architecture has developed into a professional art field and interior design is often considered something "everywoman" can do.)

2. How does a well-planned, aesthetically pleasing living environment affect the quality of family life? Is it like "high art" in its effect?

3. For use with films from home economics classes: how do they communicate with their female audience? What values do they convey? What do they stress?

4. What could be taught in home economics if interior decorating were considered an art form?

5. What principles of good design do home decorating magazines teach?

Diaries and Journals ("Household literature")

The most widely used written medium among women is the diary or journal. Many teenaged girls record all the crucial events of their lives, using the diary as a 'best friend' for confidences. This is not new. Pioneer women kept prolific diaries with recipes, weather reports, homemaking logs, etc. for their amusement and for reference in future years (when planning events subject to weather conditions, for deciding how many pickles to make, etc.). Diaries, trips and social occasions offer some of our most intimate looks at everyday life of ordinary people in the past. The confessional aspect of diary writing seems to have attracted women. The form of the diary has become important for women's literature.

Resource Materials

Lessing, The Golden Notebook

Lillian Hellman (three autobiographies)

Sackville-West, confessional diary in Nicolson's Portrait of a Marriage

Anne Frank's diary

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the function of diaries and journals for women?

2. Why is the journal form particularly popular among women?

3. Why are so many women engaged in autobiographical writing? How does it relate to diary-keeping?

4. How might the structure of women's work in the home facilitate the use of the diary form?

5. Ask class members: how many have kept diaries? What was their content? What impulse made them want to write?

Questions for all domestic art forms

1. How have these domestic art forms been received by the art establishment? Have they been recognized, adopted, evaluated?

2. Needlework, currently popular, is now becoming "soft sculpture," supposedly inspired by Claes Oldenberg. Aren't grandma's pillows the real source?

3. What "women's art forms" are now being adopted by the mainstream culture? When men practice them, how are these forms redefined?

4. As feminists, how should we view these trends?

5. Do we want to separate the population into "artists" and "appreciators of art" in the crafts area as we have in painting, drawing, sculpture, etc? As humanists, how should we view such a trend?

Form and Function: The Art of Non-Western Women

Those forms that have been seen as "domestic arts" or "(home)crafts" in Western society are the very art forms which women all over the world share as modes of expression. With very few exceptions, fiber and textile work are the domain of females in any society. And in every society women have made use of this work-assignment to express their creative vision. Similarly, other objects which are useful in the home are generally created by women. Pottery is an outstanding example. In cultures in which men share in these activities, their work is often confined to creation of artifacts for ceremonial, rather than everyday use (e.g., Hopi men's weaving is well known; they make belts and other decorations for the all-male ceremonies of the tribe). To understand what is 'women's art,' then, one must look at the media which women have developed internationally. Also, to understand women's creativity, it is necessary to consider the way women go about their artistic work.

1. Textiles and Fibers

Creation of clothing, bedding, shelters have been among women's assigned roles in most of the world's cultures. In this section comparison can be made between Western or American textile and fiber work and the work done by women in other cultures. Important media are weaving (Navajo, Indonesian, Chinese, etc.), embroidery, beading (Native American, Inca,

southeast Asian), hide decoration (Eskimo; Plains Indian women created abstracts, their men pictorial designs on buffalo hide).

Resource Materials

Any of the readings on textiles, fibers and beadworking (see bibliography) are relevant. Some of these must be read with an eye to the bias against non-Western art forms and the tendency to deny the creativity of female artists. Few sources connect the creation of these works to women's societal roles.

Local weavers, dyers, beadworkers are excellent resource people. They have often delved into the history of their art forms. Demonstrations of spinning, weaving, etc. and the myriad ways these are accomplished in different cultures are extremely enlightening to a class.

The best resource center in the U.S. on textile history, art and labor is The Center for the History of American Needlework, 2216 Murray Avenue, Pittsburgh, Penn. 15217. The Center provides a newsletter, bibliographies on many topics, travelling exhibits of textile and needlework, and speakers on various topics.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the history of textiles tell us about women's lives? (Textile history is the longest female tradition in the arts. So little of women's work survives in the form of artifacts: textiles play a central role in the archeology of women's lives. Textiles are one of the few existing threads of women's family history, for they are passed on through the generations.

2. How does this irrepressible drive to decorate fabrics and other fiber forms serve to express women's creative energy? In what ways is it expressed? (Important parameters in textile evaluation are fiber content and texture, dying and color coordination; printing color and patterns; methods for weaving, etc., which are highly refined and specialized in many cultures.

3. How does women's role in textiles reflect her economic and social situation in various cultures?

2. Pottery, ceramics, and basketry

Women are also responsible for creating vessels, containers, and utensils for domestic use. Native American potters are outstanding examples. Their tradition is followed by the large number of women potters active today. Native American basketry and quill work are also highly refined art forms, varied among the different tribes. Asian and African basketry also illustrate the internationality of these forms.

Resource Materials

See bibliography for literature on pottery, ceramics, and basketry.

Exhibits of pottery are often available at local museums and historical societies.

Working potters, basketmakers are often willing to give talks and demonstrations.

Questions for Discussion

1. How are pottery, ceramics, and basketry to be judged as art forms? What aesthetic judgements should be made? (Line, form, functionality, decoration in the form of color, glaze, raised designs, etc.)

2. How has design of pottery, ceramics, and basketry influenced the mainstream art forms? (In particular the abstract designs of Southwestern U.S. pottery or Northwestern basketry should be considered.)

3. More and more, pottery is coming to be viewed as a major art form by Western critics and collectors. Why is this so? What impact will it have on the medium? (Note that many major painters have thrown pots, e.g., Picasso, O'Keeffe; more men are becoming commercially successful as potters.)

4. What does the history of pottery in Western society tell us about the history of much women's art (The commercialization of pottery and its takeover by small factories--male run--put domestic potters out of business. Only recently has pottery returned as an art form in the U.S. mainstream culture. Mass-production of dishware has endangered hand production in many parts of the world.)

3. Women as Art Workers

In the section on Domestic arts the notion of cooperative and collective work is discussed. These methods apply equally to non-Western women, in fact, to work methods in non-technological societies.

Resource Materials

The film Kenojuak is a beautiful portrait of cooperative community art work--the designer, the stone carver and the printer all sign the prints. It also shows male/female division of labor in a fashion which is productive and developed through community standards.

The studies of quilt-making are a good Western example--individuals made the tops, groups quilted them.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is the creation of art organized in non-Western societies? How does it fit into the work patterns of these cultures?

2. How is technique and artistic knowledge passed on to younger women?

3. How is the labor divided, if it is? (Do men work with the women, e.g., doing the heavier work? Do children learning the skills work as apprentices?)

Unit III: Women on Women

Growing Up Female
Women's Lives
Creating and Recreating on Artistic Heritage
Erotic and Sexual Images

Growing Up Female

Women's art and culture tells us about the experience of growing up female in the United States. Women artists may offer a picture of female adolescence which differs from that of male artists or the popular media; popular music is an excellent source for studying both the myth and reality of the female experience. The Supremes give good examples of teen-age longings and dreams; Meg Christian has an excellent number on falling in love with her gym teacher; Holly Near sings about her sister.

Autobiographies are also valuable resources in studying female adolescence.

Resource Materials

Popular music (see bibliography)
Anne Frank's Diary
Toni Morrison, Sula
The Bluest Eye
Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Angelou
Zelda Fitzgerald, short stories
Rita Mae Brown, Rubyfruit Jungle (growing up lesbian)

Katherine Anne Porter, Pale Horse Pale Rider

Carson McCullers, The Member of the Wedding

Austen, Emma and Pride and Prejudice

Bronte, Jane Eyre

Alix Kates Schulman, Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen

Lisa Alther, Kinflicks

Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar

Photography: Women See Women

Children's literature: have students bring in their favorite children's books to class; discuss both in sociological and artistic terms.

Selected poetry: poetry often captures the experience of growing up; good for sparking class discussion.

Questions for Discussion

1. How do women artists show us our lives? Their own?

2. When we read of artists' lives, do they seem to portray themselves as unique, or are they describing common female experience?

3. What role did women who wrote or illustrated children's books have on our lives?

4. How do minority women artists depict their lives in white society?

5. How does popular music reflect or challenge stereotypes about female adolescence?

6. What themes reappear in nineteenth and twentieth century novels of female adolescence?

Women's Lives

1. Home and Family

Women artists have often depicted the lives of women who are wives, mothers, and homemakers. Sometimes they satirize the homemaker role; often their vision of domestic experience differs from that of the popular media in general or that of specific male artists. Art which focuses on domestic subjects has in the past been considered trivial, and needs to be re-evaluated from a feminist perspective.

Resource Materials

Photography: Dorothea Lange, American Country Women
works by Lenore Davis, Diane Arbus, and
studies in Women See Women (see bibliography)

Literature:
Mrs. Gaskell, Wives and Daughters
George Eliot, Middlemarch
Harriet Arnow, The Dollmaker
Sue Kaufmann, Diary of a Mad Housewife
Up the Sandbox
L. Hansberry, Raisin in the Sun
Ntozake Shange, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf
Sheehan, A Welfare Mother
M. R. Reinhart, Married People
Boothe, The Women

Paintings, Sculpture, Graphics:
Ellen Lanyon
Marjorie Strider
Kollwitz
Cassatt
Marisol
Art of Womanhouse

TV Soap Operas: most successful soap operas have been written by women; they are art (yet not considered "art") for women by women, and are a major imaginative source for many American women. Students could watch, evaluate by theme and structure.

Questions for Discussion

1. How have women artists depicted the domestic lives of women?

2. Are these depictions adequate or accurate reflections of female experience?

3. How do women artists visions of domesticity differ from those of male artists and popular images of women? How are they the same?

4. If the homemaker role is both the core of female experience and the source of women's oppression, how do we evaluate art which denegrates, glorifies, satirizes, or otherwise focuses on that role?

5. How do women artists show women relating to women within the domestic sphere?

6. How would we begin a reevaluation of art which focuses on domestic subjects?

2. Work and Community

Women artists also show us women's lives outside the home. Their tone may be sympathetic, realistic, condescending, etc. Artistic representations of women in these roles may serve to define and redefine traditional roles of women. Women artists depicting themselves as artists are in fact describing women at work.

Resource Materials

Literature: Gail Godwin, The Odd Woman
Stalvey, The Education of a Wasp
Esther Broner, Her Mothers
Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle (described a writer of Gothic romances)
M. H. Washington, Blackeyed Susans (stories)
Colette, Cheri and Last of Cheri

Dorothy Sayers, Gaudy Night
Pearl Buck, The Good Earth
Nectar in a Sieve
Judith Rossner, Looking for Mr. Goodbar
Mrs. Gaskell, Cousin Phyllis
Gersternberg, Jury by her Peers
Hellman, Little Foxes and The Children's Hour
Autobiography of Mountain Wolf Woman
Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing
Childress, Wine in the Wilderness

Photography: see bibliography for photography on working women

Music: Aunt Molly Jackson, Elizabeth Cotten, Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez (see bibliography).

Painting, Sculpture, Graphics: see work of Bishop, Ringgold, Cassatt, Beaux, John, Modersohn-Becker, Kollwitz

Questions for Discussion

1. What repeated themes do you find in art which depicts women at work?

2. What relationships between women are consistently portrayed?

3. In what ways have women artists depicted themselves as artists?

4. How do you establish the tone of a work of art: the attitude of the creator toward the subject?

Creating and Recreating an Artistic Heritage for Women

A woman artist often finds herself with primarily male models to draw on. This problem is a major obstacle for accomplished artists as well as a negative influence on aspiring artists. Women have been systematically excluded from art education and practice. Women who have achieved have been written out of art history. Women have been discouraged, even prohibited from expressing their own vision. As painters, sculptors, and writers, women have been overlooked, trivialized and had their work attributed to male artists. The creations of needlewomen, potters, and journalists have not been accepted as art at all.

Many women artists have suffered from the lack of female models and a female tradition in the arts. In times past, and especially in recent years women artists, working with feminist historians and critics, have been actively seeking out overlooked women artists. They are attempting to create a tradition for themselves out of history, myth and fantasy. Because history has been written by, for and about men, women artists have begun to call on obscure, often mythical foremothers for guidance and inspiration.

1. Rediscovering female artists

(See section on Overlooked Women Artists) Virginia Woolf writes eloquently of her need for female role models, for

information on others who have struggled in the same way. Just knowing that other women have succeeded, or even tried, to become artists encourages young artists. The intense feelings of being alone while trying to express a personal artistic vision are exacerbated by the isolation of a woman among men.

2. Female Themes and Imagery

Many of the most powerful experiences in female experience have not found expression in the arts, for art has been created by men or around themes which they deemed appropriate subjects of art. Because men control art education, art funding, art showing and printing, and performing, they have been in the position to dictate what can be art. (See Sections "The Myth of the Great Artist" and Women and Art Establishment.) Women now are asserting that their experiences are art and are creating works centered on themes of menstruation, childbirth, housewifery, pregnancy, menopause, lesbianism. Themes like prostitution, motherhood, childhood, home and family, sex life, etc. are being reinterpreted from a female point of view. Women are demanding that their experience be recognized as part of the universal "human experience" previously defined by men. At this stage women's art is extremely personal, for women artists are reaching out from this personal base to try to capture the larger spheres of human experience.

Similarly, women artists are employing imagery which reflects their own experience. Vaginal forms, forms which are

inward-centered and curved/circular, literary imagery based on experiences like menstruation and childbirth are common. Some women artists emphasize their relation to nature and the earth. Women artists cross boundaries of various art forms, creating, for example, soft sculpture. Even the interpretation of colors in visual art is altered: the blood red of wounds and danger becomes the blood red of menstruation or childbirth, a part of the natural life cycle. Many women artists see the very media they work with (the language, the canvases, the linear structure of music) as phallocentric, flawed vehicles for the expression of female experience. Experimentations to try to create female-suitable media are flourishing.

3. Traditional Female Media

Women are experimenting with media such as diaries, fiber and textiles, pottery, and needlework which have traditionally been associated with women and women's social roles, yet are often using them in new ways. Quilting has become "soft sculpture" (attributed by the New York Times, when describing the work of four women artists, entirely to the impact of Claes Oldenburg); pottery becomes a decorative as well as functional form with a very broad range of expression; diaries become autobiographies and autobiographical novels. These works too, are an attempt to find a mode of expression comfortable for women artists and which connects her to a tradition of her

own. (See sections on "Art Created within the Confines of Domesticity" and "Form and Function: The Art of Non-Western Women".

4. Myth and Fantasy

Starting from mythology as we know it, passed down by the oral and written tradition of patriarchal society, women artists have begun to weave their own experiences and desires into a mythology which is an artistic tradition in its own right. One source is the scraps of information on such figures as Sappho; another includes mythological figures such as the Muses, the Fates, the Amazons, which associates creativity and drive with women; another is the writings of historians and archeologists who have investigated possible matriarchal pre-historic societies and their goddess- fertility cults; a final source is the imaginations of the artists themselves. Ideas of female- centered, female-dominated, and all-female societies have sparked art work which is exciting and intriguing, reaching out to tap the fantasies of women at a deep level. Just experiencing, through art, an alternative vision of past and future can be a remarkable and refreshing experience for women in a male-dominated society.

Resource Materials

The music of Kay Gardener (Olivia Records) is an excellent example of attempts to graft contemporary female experience onto ancient female traditions (she uses "Sapphic" music as her source).

Visions of a future/past female world are seen in Mrs. Gaskell's Cranford, Joanna Russ' The Female Man and the Short story "When it Changed" in the Sargent Women of Wonder anthology and, most superbly, in Monique Wittig's Les Guerillieres. This last is a fine example of novelistic-mythologizing and also an important attempt to create a female form for literature. See also Ursula LeGuin's Left Hand of Darkness for a vision of a one-gender society.

Poetry: The World Split Open (ed. Bernikow) Howe and Bass.

Esther Harding, Women's Mysteries a good source of background on mythological, historical, and religious sources of women's tradition.

Davis, The First Sex (discusses the matriarchal theory of the beginning of civilization - an idea which underlies some women's art).

The Female Surrealist painters are a wonderful amalgam of witchcraft, Jungian archetypes and their own female-centered imagery. See articles in the Feminist Art Journal, Ms., and sections of Peterson and Wilson (see bibliography). These materials form particularly valuable basis for a discussion of an "Alternative Vision," for these works are radically different from those of male surrealists which are often sexist and violent in the extreme.

Frida Kahlo's painting is an object lesson in expression of woman's personal experience.

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own.

Duffy, Rites. A play illustrating a radical re-interpretation of mythology and female experience.

A particularly telling example of the difficulties in trying to create art without a tradition (or with a negative one) to draw on might be humor. Women have been the source of butt of humor, but rarely the creators of it, outside female circles. Women humorists, artists trying to put humor into their art, find it difficult to joke about experiences which have only recently been taken seriously. Misinterpretation is rampant (accusations of anti-feminism sometimes crop up). The book Titters might be used as an example.

See the sections on "Women See Women" above for visual art which tries to capture the female experience. Also Erotic and Sexual Images, below. The new music of the feminist movement is good here too.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is it important for women artists to have a "heritage," a "tradition?" What is it that artists get from role models and forebearers?

2. Why might it be easier to achieve truly great expression in a medium like oil painting, with its 1000+ year history, than a medium like fiber sculpture? Can there be a "great artist" in the traditional sense in a new art form? What is the challenge of a new art form?

3. Does it matter whether a tradition is based on history or on mythology? How does each affect an aspiring artist?

4. What is the role of female-oriented art in the women's movement? For women in general?

5. How shall we judge these new expressions, these new media which are emerging?

Erotic and Sexual Images

Since the essential difference between men and women lies in their roles in sex and reproduction, it is not surprising that women's art radically reinterprets these facets of life, nor that much new women's art attempts to express purely female experiences in sex, childbirth, menstruation, etc. And, since in men's art women have been primarily seen as objects of sexual attention, women artists work equally hard to reinterpret the relation between woman as a subject of art and as an art object. Women artists are much concerned with the body, its functions, its beauty. Some women artists have begun attempts to interpret the male body through a female point of view as well.

One of the heritages of male dominated society, for many women, is extremely repressed sexuality, a Victorian heritage. For more natural expressions of female sexuality, artists turn particularly to the black tradition in the U.S. The blues tradition has strong, independent, sensual women and has been a source for much of women's music in the mainstream. Lesbian writers and musicians have been drawing on this and other traditions to build a separate form of expression. The use of ancient female-associated forms and imagery is prevalent.

Resource Materials

Judy Chicago's Through the Flower is a fine expression of a woman searching for her own vision and finding that she

must first express her sexuality before going "through the flower" to other aspects of her life and experience.

Repressed female sexuality, expressed metaphorically in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights or Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, or Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (a metaphor for sex or birth) spark excellent class discussions. (See Moers and/or Showalter.)

Black women's music is a wonderful illustration of male-female relations and healthy sexuality. Bessie Smith, Victoria Spivey, Billie Holiday, Lucie Spann, Sweet Emma Barnett. See also writers such as Gayl Jones, those in Blackeyed Susans, Toni Cade, etc.

There are a great many visual artists who express sensuality and sex graphically in their work. Among them Wiltke, Shapiro, Strider. O'Keeffe denies that her images are sexual. This makes a good discussion topic (see Great Painters).

The Lesbian writers are frequently explicitly sexual: Wittig (especially The Lesbian Body), Rita Mae Brown; poets from Aphra, etc. Lesbian music, recorded largely on Olivia, has sensuality, sexuality, and humor. Jane Rule's book is a good resource for lesbianism in literature.

Contemporary works such as Fear of Flying or The Odd Woman are valuable bases for discussion of the struggle to establish a healthy sexual identity and to express it with honesty and humor.

Photography and painting depicting nudes: a good basis for discussion, for looking at nudes explores the subject/object relation of the artist to the model. Just having a class express responses to depictions of women by women leads to valuable exchange of impressions and experiences. Karen Tweedy-Holmes' photos of male nudes are also a good example of a healthy view of the body. These are shocking to some students who may rarely have seen a male nude, but that in itself is an accurate reflection of dual standards toward the sexuality of men and women.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the traditional view of female sexuality and how is it being reinterpreted by women artists?

2. What are the difficulties faced by a woman artist who is attempting to express sexual themes in her art? (See particularly Judy Chicago, Through the Flower.)

3. What events of women's lives are being reinterpreted? Do these works speak to your own experience?

4. What sorts of imagery, metaphor, form is used to convey femaleness?

5. How do women see women? How do women see men?

6. Is there a specific lesbian "vision?" How does lesbian art recapture female experience?

Unit IV: Art and Politics

The Insights of Marginality
Women's Art and Social Criticism
Art and Feminism

A major role of artists in any society is to be visionaries and critics. Women artists have not shirked this role. A profound artistic vision may cut to the core of experience, embodying deep truths in a fashion which communicates them to a larger population, exposing ideas, emotions, values, and attitudes. Good art embodies the 'spirit of an age' by drawing out its essence; it expresses and reminds us of what will remain as worthy or unworthy in the future. In the sense that political struggles focus on questions of values and morality, all art is political, for it reflects the world view of the artist. Women's art can be political in two ways: it may reflect an alternative vision of our society (the vision of its female half) and it may reflect the mores and values of a new society the artist envisions. Women artists' view of the female condition is part of their critique of the human condition.

The Insights of Marginality

Because they are not male, not part of the group which defines social and political norms for the society, women's

art is by definition a critique of those norms. It is, from the mainstream point of view, a "deviant" expression. Parallels can be drawn between women's art and art by members of minority groups, whose experience has been similarly denied reality by the dominant culture.

Resource Materials

This is a good opportunity to bring in the work of minority artists, and especially minority women. They are well represented in the bibliography: writers, painters and graphic artists, musicians, a photographer. The sources of their inspiration (African, American, female art) in theme, medium and technique should be analyzed. A number of the works reflect minority women's reflections on their own roles as artists.

The work of Diane Arbus is an outstanding example of a 'marginal' expression. Her photos are often deeply disturbing and her vision may appear to many to be haunted or grotesque. Her series on transexuals and prostitutes challenges traditional notions of sexuality and sex roles.

The work of the women Surrealists, of gothic novelists, of poets such as Anne Sexton, whose vision is unique and usually perceived as "disturbing," would also lend themselves to this discussion.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do these 'female perspectives' strike a familiar or sympathetic chord in female audiences? How have they been received/interpreted by male critics and audiences? How by female critics?

2. What similarities are there between women's artistic vision and that of specific minority artists? Do they share themes, do they share experiences? How are the differences expressed? What might their experiences in training, in showing, in publishing have been?

3. How does the art of minority women reflect their double oppression and alienation?

4. Which aspects of society do women artists "see" more clearly because they are "in" but not "of" mainstream culture as defined by the male "canon"? Are there particular human (or female) experiences which women artists have penetrated especially keenly?

5. What do women artists see? What does society look like to their pens or camera lenses? Are their visions purely individual, or do they share some common perceptions?

Women's Art and Social Criticism

In addition to the critique of the general perception of 'reality' inherent in work which expresses the unique perspective of a far-sighted and perceptive artist, women have also produced works which are focussed on widely-discussed political and social issues of their times. Women artists have functioned as members of political organizations, parties and movements dedicated to social change. In these connections the role of the artist is that of visionary, articulator, popularizer, propagandist, inspirer. Other artists have worked singly, expressing their message solely through their art. These messages may be direct (e.g., song lyrics about an event, photos or prints of situations faced by the people) or posed in metaphorical terms, addressing the contemporary issues by articulating underlying, universal themes.

Resource Materials

The work of Kollwitz stands out among that of socially conscious artists. Both her work and her biography offer powerful insights into women's role and women's consciousness. She develops a profoundly political, and profoundly personal expression which is both timely and timeless.

Faith Ringgold's work is a history in itself of the black movement since the 1960's. Other minority artists, (writers, poets, painters) are good examples. The plays of Alice Childress are especially fine.

In music, such singers as Joan Baez and Buffy St. Marie illustrate protest singing. Aunt Molly Jackson and other artists of the Appalachian unionization movement offer case histories of the artist as a social revolutionary. Their consciousness stems from a specifically female point of view. The more metaphorical expression of such singers as Joni Mitchell is also important to examine.

Questions for Discussion

1. How have women worked within movements for political and social change? As artists, have they been free to express their own visions of society, or are they mere mouthpieces for their organizations?

2. What constitutes political art? How shall we judge it? How would the artists judge the value of their art and wish their art judged (e.g., is political art 'good' when it is effective, or should exclusively aesthetic criteria be applied?)

3. Does political art lose its value when the issues it addresses are no longer current?

4. Have women artists articulated a viewpoint on political and social issues which is the same as men's, or are some particular themes, images, and forms of expression uniquely or predominantly female?

5. What social criticism in art has arisen out of the feminist movement? Out of the suffrage movement? What value does that art have today? (As art, as especially insightful expression of the values of the movement, as women's history?)

Art and Feminism

The cultural goal of the women's movement might be characterized as the liberation of the female imagination. Art is an expression of feminism not only as it specifically addresses the political and social goals of the women's movement, but also as it expresses a female point of view: women's fantasies, hopes, fears, and life experiences. Thus much of the material in this course outline could be included under this heading. Any of the artists discussed herein should be reevaluated from a feminist point of view. Feminism speaks to more than political beliefs. In its assertion that 'the personal is political' all aspects of our lives are opened to reevaluation and redefinition. In art, a feminist viewpoint reexamines not only the subject matter and modes of expression, but the very method of artistic creation. It insists that art, like other aspects of our lives, does not exist in isolation, that artists are not a class of 'special' people, but are people who express the aspirations and fears of all of us. The models of traditional female modes of production have been followed by feminist artists who create and work collectively, who found their own schools and studios, who try to break down the barriers between artists and the public.

Resource Materials

Cindy Nemser, interviews in Art Talk

Some negative depictions of women which could be compared and contrasted by a class might be Boothe's play The Women, Duffy's play Rites, the art of June Leaf, Miriam Shapiro, and Marisol. Students may react strongly to art which portrays women in negative situations. It is important for them to sort out their anger and fear over the actual circumstances of female existence from their criticism of the art and the artist. For example, they may need to struggle with the question, what was the artist's motivation in depicting a rape?

Materials from the sections on 'crafts' and 'female art forms' might be brought in here for a discussion of the politics of definition of art and its ramifications for women artists.

The specifically political statements of women's movement poets, painters, etc. should be discussed, as art and as expressions of feminism. A good selection of illustrations can be found in the New Woman's Survival Sourcebook. See also poetry and statements from 1960's groups (e.g., the Redstockings) in Sisterhood is Powerful (ed. Robin Morgan).

Different theories of feminism can be discussed by looking at feminists' art. For instance, the matriarchist point of view is often most clearly understood through music or prints about earth-goddesses, etc. Lesbian art is also a very important form of feminist expression.

Questions for Discussion

1. What has been the role of artists in the feminist movement? What ought artists' role in political movements to be? (See above "Women's Art and Social Criticism").

2. How has the notion that 'the personal is political' affected feminist art? Feminist artists? Feminists' evaluations of art?

3. How do we assess art which depicts women in traditional roles?

4. One of the functions of art is to capture the spirit of the artist's age. When art by women depicts women negatively, how should it be judged and used by feminists? How can we differentiate between critical views of women which are women-hating or victim-blaming from those which are meant to critique the situations in which women find themselves by showing the deprivations caused by sexism?

5. How do we evaluate art which is created specifically for a political purpose (e.g. posters, book illustrations, etc.)?

6. How does a feminist perspective force us to reevaluate our categories for creative work? (The dichotomy between art and craft is antithetical to the feminist view.) See Women in the Private Sphere, Third World Women's Art, etc.

Unit V: Great Women and Great Art

This section is intended to point out some women artists who particularly deserve, or are particularly suitable for, individual study. Women artists, past and present, are undergoing reevaluation, and many truly major figures have emerged. A few in each of a number of important fields are mentioned below. We all have our favorites, but these women are all important artists whose work is quite accessible to students and for whom some resource materials are available. Study of "The Myth of the Great Artist" in section one is crucial to this section, for women artists cannot be judged in a vacuum; understanding of the contexts in which they have created is necessary for a full appreciation and evaluation of their art.

Resource Materials

See bibliography for full listings under each heading.

Writers

Lessing: The Golden Notebook portrays a woman who is a writer. In form it is experimental, integrating diary and novel fragments, plus fully developed narrative. Lessing's introduction is valuable for study as well.

Hellman: The dramatist and the autobiographer can be compared and contrasted. Hellman was a successful writer for the popular stage, although her current fame is based on the three volumes of autobiography. One aspect to study might be the progression of autobiographies from the diary-

like An Unfinished Woman through the portraits of Pentimento to her most personal statement in Scoundrel Time, a fine study in itself of an artist who has become a political figure.

Woolf: A Room of One's Own has been suggested above. Her androgynous perspective is certainly a radical departure from the male literary tradition.

Plath: The prose and poetry of Sylvia Plath seem to speak very strongly to students. She certainly illustrates in her wit that the 'personal is political.'

Painters

O'Keeffe: Recognized as one of the great painters of the twentieth century, O'Keeffe's statements on her art deny any specifically female imagery although its sensuality cannot be debated. Her 'flower paintings' make the incidental into the eternal. O'Keeffe's biography is a case-study of women in the art world.

Frankenthaler: Her contributions to abstract art, and her use of color place her among the most outstanding contemporary Americans. She can be productively studied as part of the New York art world, as student and colleague of the most well-known figures in abstract expressionism, and as one who moves to establish her own unique vision.

Sculptors

Hepworth: The great British sculptor is a fine example of a woman who has integrated her family life into her life as an artist. Her Pictorial Autobiography juxtaposes snapshots of her children, home, studio, friends and private life with the abstract sculptures she was creating at the various times in her life, thus expressing her life through her art. Hepworth's is highly abstract art which is particularly accessible to interpretation --a fine introduction to abstraction for those who might find it cold and forbidding.

Nevelson: The evolution of Nevelson's sculpture illustrates most clearly the unfolding, development and disciplining of a truly great artistic vision. Her own descriptions of her fascination with light and shadow, her need to express her perceptions, reveal artistic drive and imagination clearly and directly. Nevelson's feminist political

stance might also be brought in, focussing on the abstract and 'non-political' form of her artistic expression and discussing whether it is female and feminist nonetheless.

Photographers

Arbus: See section on "The Insights of Marginality"

Cunningham: A pioneer photographer, especially well known for studies of the human figure and for natural forms. Her flower photos could be profitably contrasted with O'Keeffe's. Her personality and her art are well portrayed in the film Never Give Up.

Bourke-White: Perhaps one of the best known women artists. Her commercial success broke barriers to women in professional (especially industrial) photography, and she travelled to the soviet union and to battle fronts. Bourke-White's studies of American industry, of American, Soviet, Indian, and South African life are among the most moving. Her personal history is fascinating as well.

Lange: Lange was among those artists whose depiction of the poverty and destitution resulting from the depression and droughts of the 1930's brought about public demands for financial and work relief programs. The portraits of common people, in which she specialized, are no less moving today. Her photo-essay American Country Women juxtaposes portraits of women with photos of some meaningful element of the subject's home environment, thus capturing the life as well as the moment.

Musicians

Smith: Bessie Smith's life and art are a testament to the imagination and the strength of American black women. Her biography describes one tragedy after another. Her music is moving and beautiful. The texts tell the story of women's lives.

Talma: An under-recognized and rarely-performed composer, she is one of a number of important women writers of music.

Price: The opera stage has been one of the places in which women artists have achieved true recognition. Price's performances and interpretations have broken new ground in her field. The stereotype of the "prima donna" merits attention.

Dancers/Choreographers

Graham: A legendary figure, Martha Graham has revolutionized dance and trained two generations of dancers and choreographers who have gone on to popularize and reinterpret her ideas. She dances Jocasta from Oedipus Rex in the film Night Journey, one of a number of studies from classical myth and literature which she produced from the point of view of the female character. Prior to Graham, women danced; men choreographed; her integration of two formerly separate, and hierarchically structured roles deserves study as well.

Tharp: Another revolution has occurred in dance in the work of Twyla Tharp. She is interested in more natural, tensionless, human movement in dance and has combined elements of other art forms into her work.

Fiber

Zeisler: Claire Zeisler's fiber sculptures were among the first to win recognition as "art" by major museums, galleries and critics. They are moving, sometimes ominous, always powerful. Meilach has a number of photos in her Macrame: Creative Design in Knotting.

Chanel: Her designs for clothing incorporated radical use of fabrics, color and drapings. Certainly the "chanel suit" has attained the status of a timeless classic. Her biography is fascinating.

Theater/Film

Hepburn: One of the 'great ladies of the American stage,' Katherine Hepburn's interpretations of classic and modern roles have made some of the most memorable productions in theatre and film. Her 1940's 'tough girl' figure was a role model for filmgoing girls all over the country.

Wertmuller: The first woman director to receive international popular and critical acclaim, her films have focussed on male-female relationships, exploring the world of whores and the super-rich. She has focussed attention on the violence in society, particularly violence between men and women.

Bernhardt: A legend in her own time, Sarah Bernhardt's art is less well known than her life story. She might be considered as an artist, and also as a cultural phenomenon.

Interdisciplinary Artists

Women artists have worked to break down the barriers between media, refusing to confine themselves to just one form of expression. For example, O'Keeffe (like Picasso) has taken up pottery in her latest years; Hellman started on a whole second career as an autobiographer; women in dance have fused the roles of choreographer and performer. There are women artists who cannot be classified as 'painters' or 'musicians' or 'sculptors' because their work spans so broad a spectrum.

Delaunay: painter; collagist; interior designer; needlewoman; set designer; illustrator; clothing designer. Sonia Delaunay followed her fascination with shape in motion into all areas of visual art. She is known primarily as a painter of the post-impressionist Simultane school, which she founded with her husband, Robert. But she let herself be limited only by her vision, not by any discipline or technique.

Chase: Working originally in sculpture, particularly monumental sculpture, Doris Chase has collaborated with choreographers in creating dance pieces which employ her sculpture in motion. She presently works in video, capturing the movement of dancers and sculptures with sophisticated visual techniques. Chase also designs moveable and combinable sculpture for children's play areas.

Questions for Discussion

1. What areas in the arts have been more and less open to women? How have women artists redefined media to make them more compatible with their creative ideas?

2. Which women have become artists? Are there commonalities in successful women artists' experiences? How have they gotten recognition?

3. What makes these artists' work 'great art?' Are their statements universal, timeless?

4. What has been the critical reception of these artists' work? Does a feminist viewpoint alter that interpretation? How?

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Women's Art and Culture

Abbreviations:

FAJ = Feminist Art Journal

NYT = New York Times

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10 East 53rd Street
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Women's Caucus for Art
7010 Aronow Drive
Falls Church, Virginia 22042

For information about a slide collection created specifically for Women's Art and Culture, please write:

Nancy F. Conklin/Slides
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